THE CLERK AND THE PRIEST

An observation · that unconnected conquerors, each solving the same problem from the same position and none of them reading the others, keep the clerks of the kingdoms they take and do one of a few things to the priests — with the sincerity of anyone's belief bracketed throughout, as unknowable from outside and beside the point

thomas j. bryan with claude (anthropic) · held as tested, not revealed

Two hierarchies meet

A conqueror never arrives in an empty country. He arrives in a running order — a kingdom that already governs itself, and that governs itself, as every durable order does, by two distinct kinds of men. There are the men who make the thing work: who assess the tribute, keep the registers, hold the provinces, judge the disputes, and turn the ruler's will into collected grain and mustered labour. Call them the clerks, though they are often grand — a landed service nobility, a scholar-bureaucracy, a lineage of provincial lords. And there are the men who make the thing *right*: who tend the legitimating belief that tells everyone, rulers and ruled alike, why this hierarchy is the natural shape of the world and not merely the residue of some old violence. Call them the priests, though they too take many forms — a temple clergy, a caste of mediums, a class of scribes who alone can read the sacred calendar. The clerks run the order; the priests naturalise it.

Between them they convert a distribution of power into a settled world, so that the man at the bottom obeys not mainly from fear of the man at the top but because obeying is simply what one does, the tide he has always had to swim in.

The conqueror has such a pair of his own, and he has a problem. He has beaten this kingdom, but beating it is the cheap part; *governing* it is the ruinous part, and if he tears out its whole hierarchy and installs his own men from top to bottom he will spend the conquest's whole yield holding a country that no longer runs itself. So across an astonishing range of times and places, conquerors who could not have copied one another reach the same solution, and this paper is an observation of that convergence and of its inner structure. The solution has two moves. First: keep the clerks — leave the running-machinery of the subject kingdom in the hands of the men who already work it, and rule the country through them. Second: do something to the priests — reach some accommodation between the conqueror's legitimating belief and the subject's, so that the two are made to map onto one another and continuity of belief becomes indistinguishable from submission to the new power. The first move is nearly invariant. The second move takes a small number of forms, and which form it takes is the most interesting variable in the whole pattern. What follows sets four unconnected conquests beside one another, watches both moves in each, and then asks the question that matters: why do such distant men do the same thing, and how do they do it without ever reading one another's notes?

Keep the clerks

Begin with the invariant, because it is the sturdiest part of the pattern and the least surprising once stated. A tax cannot be assessed by a man who does not know the district; a province cannot be held by an official the population will not recognise; a harvest cannot be collected by a stranger who does not speak the language of the fields. The men who can do these things already exist in the conquered kingdom, trained across generations,

embedded in the villages, trusted or at least obeyed — and to a conqueror counting the cost of rule they are the single most valuable asset the country contains. So he keeps them.

When the Arab armies took the Sasanian empire of Persia in the middle of the seventh century, they kept the *dehqans*, the Persian landed gentry who had assessed and collected the taxes of the Sasanian state, and they kept the state's administrative apparatus so completely that the fiscal registers went on being kept in Persian for two generations, until the caliphal government was Arabised around the turn of the eighth century. When the British captured the kingdom of Buganda in the 1890s, they kept the *bakungu*, the Kabaka's county chiefs, and ruled the country through them so thoroughly that London posted only a handful of officials to a kingdom of some two million. When the Manchus overran Ming China in 1644 — a few hundred thousand conquerors astride a hundred and fifty million subjects — they kept the Confucian scholar-gentry and, with them, the entire Ming bureaucracy and the imperial examination system that produced it, recruiting the same literati to the same offices under a new dynasty. And when the Spanish took central Mexico after 1521, they kept the *caciques*, the Nahua nobility, as intermediary lords and tribute-collectors, and built the early colonial economy on the tribute and labour those nobles extracted from their own commoners; the crown even walled off a legal "República de Indios" in which indigenous town councils went on, in the phrase of the record, letting the native population govern the native population. Four conquerors, four continents of difference, one move: the clerks are kept. Whatever else changes at the top of a conquered kingdom, the men who make it run tend to survive the conquest and serve the conqueror, because the conqueror needs exactly what they alone can do.

What happens to the priest

The interpretive class — the project's term for the men who monopolise the reading of the sacred and so control the one channel through which the

legitimating belief is known — has no such uniform fate. Its treatment is the variable, and the variable turns on a single question: how can the conqueror's legitimating belief be made to relate to the subject's? There are only a few workable answers, and the four conquests display them almost as a set.

The first answer is to **re-dye**: to keep the subject's own sacred institution intact as a vessel and pour the conqueror's content into it, so that the interpretive function survives by converting. Buganda is the clean instance. The Ganda kingship was a sacred institution — the Kabaka the living centre of a cosmos, tended by a priesthood of mediums to the old gods. The British and their missionaries did not abolish that kingship; they Christianised it. The Kabaka remained the sacred centre, but a Christian one; the old shrines gave way to a cathedral; the kingdom's Protestant chiefs, having won its religious civil war, re-narrated its whole royal history as a providential progress toward the Christian light it had now reached. The vessel was kept and re-coloured, and the men who tended it — now Christian chiefs and clergy rather than mediums to the old gods — carried on tending it. (The old god-mediums themselves, the rival priesthood proper, were displaced, a point the next answer will illuminate.) The result is an interpretive class that converts fast and survives intact, because the conqueror asked it not to abandon its sacred institution but to keep it and change its dye.

The second answer inverts the direction and is stranger for it: the conqueror **adopts** the subject's legitimating belief wholesale, wears it himself, and installs himself as its supreme interpreter. The Manchus did this. They had no universal creed of their own to impose on China, and Confucianism was less a rival faith than a governance-legitimacy any ruler might claim; so rather than make the Chinese adopt a Manchu story, the Manchu emperors took on the Chinese one. They announced that the Ming had lost the Mandate of Heaven and that it had passed to them; they patronised the Confucian sages, presented themselves as exemplary Confucian sovereigns, and — the decisive stroke — made themselves the ultimate arbiters of Confucian orthodoxy, policing the scholars' reading of their own canon by

literary inquisition. The interpretive class was co-opted intact, its doctrine untouched, its personnel employed; what changed was only who sat at its apex. Here the two legitimacies were made one not by re-dyeing the subject's but by the conqueror climbing inside it. (One thing was still forced, and it is worth marking: the Manchus compelled Han men, on pain of death, to shave the forehead and wear the queue — a single, visible token of submission demanded precisely because everything else had been conceded. The pattern's cheapest form still keeps one hard marker of who won.)

The third answer keeps the two beliefs separate and stacks them: the conqueror installs his own exclusive faith on top and **subordinates** the subject's, tolerating it as a permitted inferior. This is what Islam did to Zoroastrianism in Persia. The Arab conquerors brought a universal faith that could not share a throne with another, so they did not re-dye the Zoroastrian religion or adopt it; they ranked it beneath their own. Zoroastrians were granted the status of a protected community — *dhimmi* — and assimilated, by the Caliph Umar's precedent, to the category of "People of the Book," the tolerated recipients of an earlier revelation, though the scriptural warrant for counting them so was thin and had to be stretched to reach them. They kept their fire-temples, their priests, and their own courts, in exchange for the *jizya*, the poll-tax of submission, and the acceptance of a subordinate place. But subordination is a slow starvation. Over the following three or four centuries the tax, the disabilities, and the sheer advantage of belonging to the ruling faith drew the Persian population across to Islam; the Zoroastrian priesthood, protected but demoted, dwindled as a new Muslim clerical class rose beside and above it, until the interpretive class of the old order was a marginal remnant and a portion of the faithful had sailed for India to keep the faith alive as the Parsis. The subject's priests were neither converted nor destroyed but preserved and left to wither.

The fourth answer is the harshest: the conqueror's exclusive faith moves to **replace** the subject's outright, destroying its interpretive institution and leaving the old belief to survive, if at all, only as a popular residue folded into

the new. Spanish Mexico is the instance. Catholicism, like Islam, could not share a throne, and the Spanish did not tolerate the Nahua religion as a subordinate; they set out to extirpate it. The temples were thrown down, the priesthood broken, the idols smashed, the sacrificial basins repurposed for baptism. What survived did so underground and in disguise, as the syncretism every account of colonial Mexico records — the old deities surviving as Catholic saints, the mother-goddess Tonantzin's hill becoming the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who appeared to a native convert and spoke to him in Nahuatl. Note the division of labour in this fourth case, because it clarifies all the others: the interpretive class proper — the Nahua priesthood — was destroyed, while the *clerks*, the caciques, were kept; and the missionaries took the sons of that surviving nobility into Christian schools to raise the next generation of native lords as Christian gentlemen, exactly as the Christian chiefs of Buganda would refound their kingdom's school for chiefs' sons on a mission model. The noble administrators are co-opted; the priests are destroyed; and a re-dyeing happens after all, but at the level of the common people's practice rather than the elite institution — the saints poured into the old gods' shapes from below.

Set the four side by side and the shape is plain. In every case the clerks are kept. The priests are re-dyed where the subject's sacred institution can hold the conqueror's content (Buganda), adopted where the conqueror can simply wear the subject's belief (the Manchus), subordinated where an exclusive faith tolerates a demoted rival (Zoroastrian Persia), or destroyed where an exclusive faith will not tolerate one at all (Nahua Mexico). And the variable that selects among these is legible: it turns on whether the conqueror's legitimating belief is an exclusive universal faith that brooks no rival, and on whether the subject's legitimacy sits in a re-usable political vessel that can be kept and re-coloured rather than a rival altar that must be pulled down.

The bridge

One thing runs through all four, whichever fate the priests meet, and it is the mechanism by which the two legitimacies are joined: in every case a narrative is built to map the conqueror's belief onto the subject's, and it is stretched, wherever necessary, to reach the elite the conqueror has decided to keep. The Zoroastrians were declared People of the Book though the text barely allowed it. The Baganda were declared, by their British admirers, "the Japanese of Africa" — a race so naturally civilised that the proper course was plainly to rule *through* their kingdom rather than over it, which is the difference between a licence to replace a people and a licence to keep them. The Manchus declared that the Mandate of Heaven had passed to them by the same cosmic mechanism that had legitimated every Chinese dynasty before. The Spanish friars found, or fashioned, a Virgin who spoke the conquered's language on the conquered's holy hill. Each of these is a bridge narrative, and its function is identical across the four: to make the subject elite's continued belief and its submission to the new power one and the same act, so that the elite can go over to the conqueror without experiencing itself as going anywhere at all. The bridge is the lubricant of the whole operation, and its length is the measure of the distance the two beliefs had to be dragged to meet — short and easy where they mapped closely, long and strained where they mapped badly, but built, every time.

Why sincerity is bracketed

A reader will want to ask, at each of these conversions, whether the converts *meant* it — whether the Ganda chief was a true Christian or a calculating one, whether the Persian noble embraced Islam in his heart or only in his tax return, whether the Manchu emperor revered the sages or merely used them. This paper declines the question, and the refusal is not evasion but method, so it is worth stating why.

The sincerity of a belief is, first, unknowable from outside. We do not have access to the inner life of a seventh-century dehqan or a nineteenth-

century Muganda, and even the living cannot reliably report the mixture of conviction and calculation in their own conversions. An analysis that rests its findings on that inner state rests them on sand. But the deeper reason is that sincerity is *irrelevant to how belief functions in power*, which is the only thing this observation is about. A legitimating belief does its work — installing a hierarchy, securing obedience, mapping or failing to map onto a conqueror's belief — in exactly the same way whether the men who profess it are devout or cynical or, as is almost always the case, some unrecoverable compound of both. The convert who believes and the convert who calculates make the identical move, produce the identical legitimacy, and hold the identical position; the machinery of co-optation cannot tell them apart and does not need to. Read belief, then, as one reads a currency: by what it buys and what it can be exchanged for, not by whether the man holding the coin admires the sovereign stamped on it. The question "did he really believe?" belongs to the confessional and the biography; it does not belong to the study of how power keeps itself, and dragging it in only starts an argument that cannot be won about a thing that does not matter to the result. Everything this paper claims about the clerk and the priest holds whether every convert in it was a saint or a fraud, and that indifference is a feature of the account, not a gap in it.

Why nobody reads the notes

Which leaves the largest question, the one the convergence itself forces: why do conquerors this distant from one another do the same thing? The Arab general in Ctesiphon was not consulting a manual of Roman provincial administration; the Manchu regent in Beijing had never heard of the Sasanians; the British commissioner drafting an agreement with the chiefs of Buganda was not reading up on how the Nahua caciques had fared under Cortés, and the Spanish friars had no notion of Zoroastrian *dhimmis*. There is no channel of transmission between these cases. And that absence, far from weakening the pattern, is the whole of what makes it a pattern worth

naming, because it rules out the two lazy explanations at once. If the conquerors had copied one another, the resemblance would be mere borrowing — an interesting fact about the spread of a technique, and nothing about the nature of conquest. If some law of history compelled it, we would have smuggled back exactly the ghost-in-the-machine — a force above people's heads — that any honest account of human events should refuse. The recurrence-without-contact leaves only a third explanation, and it is the one this collection is built on.

That explanation is what the collection calls *position logic*: the plain proposition that a person decides from where he stands, by what he counts as benefit against what he counts as cost, and — the part that does the work here — within the field of what his position lets him see at all. Its account of exactly this phenomenon, the recurrence across unconnected worlds, is worth quoting and then unpacking, since it names the mechanism precisely: the patterns that recur in civilisations that never touched, it holds, "are not the work of a law of history or of cultural borrowing but of position-logic at scale: that a position poses a problem, the problem has only so many good solutions, and a vantage shows only so many of them, so that people in like positions converge — a tendency and never a law." Unpack that. A conqueror standing over a running kingdom faces a definite problem — govern this cheaply — and that problem simply does not have many good answers. Tearing out the hierarchy is ruinous; leaving the kingdom ungoverned is impossible; the one solution that is neither is to keep the running-machinery and co-opt the men who work it. Any intelligent man set in that position and made to solve that problem tends to find his way to that same small answer, not because he learned it but because it is one of the few answers the problem has. The conquerors converge for the same reason two people given the same hard sum arrive at the same number: the answer was in the problem, waiting to be found, and each of them found it.

There is a second convergence folded inside the first, and it is the part that gives the pattern its poignancy. A position does not only narrow the menu of good solutions; it narrows the field of *visible* ones — what the actor

can even see as a move. The collection's image for this is a tide: the fisherman on the water must know the tide and the farmer a mile inland never once considers it, and to the farmer the tide "is not a false belief but an absent one, a thing his position never once handed him to think about." Each conqueror sees the co-optation solution because his position hands it to him; but no conqueror's position hands him the *long run* of the choice, because the long run lives in other men's histories, which are not in his field. And — this is the crucial turn — the subject elite is caught in the same narrowness from the other side. The Ganda chief deciding whether to convert and keep his lands, the Persian noble deciding whether to pay the *jizya* or profess the *shahada*, each is solving a live problem — how do I keep my position under this new master — and each solves it the same pragmatic way, going over. What neither can see is how the bargain turned out for the men who took it before him, because those men are strangers across an ocean or a millennium and their fate is simply not in his field. The Muganda cannot consult the Persian to learn that "protected continuing status" for a priestly class curdled, over three centuries, into humiliation and flight. The cacique cannot consult the *mowbed*. Position hands each actor the immediate move and hides the horizon behind it — and that shortness of sight is not a lapse in anyone's diligence but the very mechanism of the recurrence. If the horizon were long enough for each conqueror and each co-opted elite to see all the others, the pattern would dissolve into learned adjustment and there would be nothing to observe. The pattern is made of the fact that nobody reads the notes. History rhymes because the men who make it cannot see far enough to break the rhyme.

The observation, held short of a law

Stated plainly, then: two hierarchies meet in every conquest, the conqueror's and the subject kingdom's; the conqueror keeps the subject's clerks almost without exception, because he needs precisely what they alone can do; he does one of a few things to the subject's priests — re-dyes, adopts,

subordinates, or destroys — according to how his legitimating belief can be made to relate to theirs; and a bridge narrative is built in every case to map the two beliefs together, so that the subject elite's continued faith and its submission become one act. All of this recurs across conquerors who never touched, because the position poses a narrow problem, shows a narrow field of answers, and hides the long run from everyone standing in it. And sincerity is bracketed throughout, because it cannot be read and does not bear on the result.

Held honestly, this is a tendency and not a law, and the boundary is worth marking so the observation is not overstated into the determinism the whole method exists to refuse. Two elites in the same position may choose oppositely; some subject peoples do not fold at all but fight, and the pattern's own logic tells you what becomes of them — the kingdom that resists is not co-opted but broken, its clerks not kept but scattered, because it has removed itself from the bargain the co-optation offered. Bunyoro, the kingdom next to Buganda that fought the British instead of joining them, was floored and dismembered while Buganda was kept and re-dyed; the Zoroastrian holdouts who would not take the bridge were the ones who sailed for Gujarat. The co-optation is the conqueror's cheap first offer, and it is extended to the elite that will take it; refuse it, and you meet the expensive alternative the offer was designed to avoid. That the pattern has this hard edge — join and be kept, resist and be broken — is not a flaw in the observation but its completion, and it too recurs, because it too is what the position produces. The whole is offered as these things are always offered here: a lens laid over the record to make it legible, tested against the cases and held open to the next one — a tendency the position breeds, never a law it enforces.

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A note on sources. This paper is an observation drawn across four conquests, and it leans on the standard historical record for each, paraphrased rather than quoted except where a term of art carries the meaning. For the Arab conquest of Sasanian Persia: the retention of the dehqan gentry and the Persian-language fiscal administration until its Arabisation around 700; the grant of dhimmi and "People of the Book" status to Zoroastrians on the Caliph Umar's precedent, with the retention of their temples, clergy, and courts against the jizya; the gradual conversion of the Persian population over roughly the following three to four centuries (a range, and contested in its pace); and the emergence of the Parsi diaspora in India — all follow the standard scholarship, including Richard Bulliet's work on the pace of conversion and Michael Morony's on the Sasanian administrative continuity. For Buganda: the co-optation of the bakungu chiefs, the Christianisation of the sacred kingship, and the "Japanese of Africa" characterisation are treated at length, with primary quotation, in this collection's British Buganda study, to which the reader is referred. For Manchu China: the retention of Confucianism, the Ming bureaucracy, and the examination system; the Qing claim to the Mandate of Heaven; the emperors' self-presentation as Confucian sovereigns and arbiters of orthodoxy; and the 1645 queue edict follow the standard record and such scholarship as Pamela Kyle Crossley's and Mark Elliott's on Qing rulership. For Spanish Mexico: the co-optation of the cacique nobility as tribute intermediaries, the "República de Indios" and its native town councils, the destruction of the Nahua priesthood, the schooling of noble sons, and the religious syncretism epitomised by the Virgin of Guadalupe on the hill of Tonantzin follow the standard scholarship, including James Lockhart's The Nahuas After the Conquest and Matthew Restall's Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest. The gestures toward Rome's retention of Hellenistic and local civic elites beneath a grafted imperial cult, and the Normans' retention of the Anglo-Saxon shire administration beneath a replaced aristocracy, are offered as further instances the reader may test, not developed here. The framework quoted directly — that recurrence across civilisations that never touched is "position-logic at scale," a problem with few good solutions found independently again and again, together with the image of the tide for the field of the visible and the term "interpretive class" for the tenders of the sacred — is from this collection's paper Position Logic, quoted from that text and not from memory. Contested matters, above all the pace and completeness of conversion in each case, are given as ranges and flagged as contested. Sincerity is bracketed by design, as the paper argues. Part of the collection Patterns of Power. Tested, never revealed.